

New Zealand government removes more public health restrictions despite Omicron cases

Tom Peters
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On Wednesday night, New Zealand health officials reported that they had detected the country's first case of Omicron outside of the managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) hotels used to isolate people arriving from other countries.

The infected person, a DJ named Robert Etheridge, recently arrived from the UK and posted on social media that he had received a positive test result two days after spending the required 10 days in isolation—seven days in MIQ and three days in “self-isolation” on Waiheke Island near Auckland.

Etheridge had previously tested negative three times while in an MIQ hotel, before receiving his final test on day nine of the isolation period. He did not wait for the result of his test—received three days later, on December 27—before going to restaurants, a bar and a night club in Auckland, potentially exposing many other people to the highly-infectious variant of COVID-19.

On Thursday, the Ministry of Health confirmed that a second person had tested positive for Omicron while in the community: an Air New Zealand staff member who worked on a flight between Sydney, Australia, and Auckland. The crew member had arrived on December 24, on a flight with three other Omicron cases, and tested positive on December 27. They were then transferred to an MIQ facility.

COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins told the media on Thursday that up to 100 people deemed to be close contacts of Etheridge were being tested and told to self-isolate. However, Hipkins declared that the government was not planning to reinstate a lockdown in Auckland, or to bring back a boundary restricting travel to and from the city.

The minister declared that New Zealand was “in quite a different position to much of the rest of the world, in that we have very low circulation of COVID-19 in the community, we don't have Omicron circulating... and we want to keep it that way for as long as we can.”

In fact, the Labour Party-led government has adopted a policy of allowing COVID-19 to spread, as Hipkins basically admitted. He encouraged complacency, saying: “I don't want to over-react to this. We are moving to a point where there is going to be freer movement at the border... We are moving to a different space now, where we are going to have COVID-19 in the community.”

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern ended the country's previous elimination strategy in October, and since then all businesses and schools have been allowed to reopen, with minimal public health restrictions.

As of yesterday there were 1,226 confirmed active cases of the Delta variant of COVID-19, and New Zealand's total death toll is 51. While still very low by international standards, the number of deaths has risen sharply since elimination was ditched: 23 people died from the virus in the last two months. Since the Delta outbreak began in August, 564 people have been hospitalized, including 43 under the age of 10.

There are more than 70 active cases of Omicron among returned travellers staying in MIQ. The Omicron variant is far more transmissible and can infect someone who has had two doses of the Pfizer vaccine. In New Zealand, 91 percent of people aged over 12 have been double-vaccinated, which is 77 percent of the population. Only about 6 percent of people have received a third dose.

Internationally, including in the US, Europe and

Australia, Omicron has fuelled an unprecedented surge in cases since it was identified as a variant of concern in November, and hospitals are becoming overwhelmed. In a briefing on December 30, the World Health Organization warned that the “tsunami” of COVID-19 cases is paving the way for new variants that could be even worse.

Governments refuse to impose lockdowns and other necessary public health measures, instead allowing the virus to spread and to kill thousands of people daily. They are acting on behalf of major corporations, which are demanding that workers sacrifice their health and their lives, so that the extraction of profits can continue uninterrupted.

The New Zealand government has adopted the same criminal strategy of allowing COVID-19 to become endemic. Despite the presence of thousands of Delta cases and the possibility that Omicron has already begun to spread, the government last night removed some of the last remaining public health restrictions in Auckland.

The city’s “traffic light” setting has been lowered from red to orange, under the so-called “COVID-19 Protection Framework.” This means that large New Year’s Eve events can now proceed with no limits on crowd numbers.

Professor Marylouise McLaws, an epidemiologist from the University of New South Wales in Australia, told TVNZ last night that with the lifting of restrictions after two people in Auckland were found to have Omicron, “I would be worried.” She pointed out that the Delta outbreak in New Zealand began with just one positive case, and with Omicron it would be even more “difficult to find cases before they’ve inadvertently passed it on to others.”

Professor Michael Baker, an epidemiologist from Otago University, told Radio NZ that Etheridge may not have been infectious, because his housemates on Waiheke Island have tested negative, but more people still remain to be tested.

It remains unclear why Etheridge tested negative twice before testing positive. Baker said he might have had an “historic infection” and the “residue” of the virus triggered the positive result. Another possibility is that Etheridge contracted the virus while staying in MIQ. The government has refused to establish purpose-built MIQ facilities to reduce the chances of

transmission within them.

Auckland University microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles told the *New Zealand Herald* the population must “be prepared for the worst.” She urged: “If people are unwell in any way, they need to stay home and get tested. We really don’t want New Year’s Eve to be a massive super spreader event and that it will be very difficult to control cases then.”

The government, however, by recklessly proceeding to lift restrictions, has created the conditions for just such a disaster. It is encouraging the false belief that vaccination alone is enough to prevent significant numbers of deaths and disease. As Hipkins indicated, the government also intends to dismantle MIQ requirements in coming months. From the end of February, travellers from Australia will be allowed to bypass MIQ, which will inevitably allow more Omicron cases into the country.



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